



Dictating to the Mob: The History of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English

Jürg R. Schwyter
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Since the relative decline of philology in favour of criticism and theory in the study of English literature within the academy, attention paid to linguistic detail in literary works has also correspondingly suffered. If this is true for the written word, is true *a fortiori* for the spoken: the magisterial edition of Eliot’s poetry, edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (2015), includes notes on how Eliot pronounced certain words in his own reading of his work, but this deeply praiseworthy feature is highly unusual. Symptomatically, though, this information is given in re-spelling rather than the International Phonetic Alphabet or some other more accurate method: the presumption of the modernist scholar’s ignorance of phonetics is evident, and probably, alas, justified.

This ignorance is curious not only when we consider poetry, but also when we think of the remarkable sociolinguistic importance accent had and continues to have in Britain – and Shaw’s *aperçu* about

the impossibility of an Englishman opening his mouth without making another Englishman despise him remains true to the point of cliché. Orwell was another great observer of English-language sociolinguistics, as much of his political criticism of the misuse of language begins with keen, albeit impressionistic, observation. Accent seemed to interest him less, although his own experience involving the importance (or more interestingly *lack* of importance) of one's accent when a tramp should not be discounted. His own voice and pronunciation will have to remain conjectural unless somewhere in the BBC archives a recording of it is one day found. But the very fact that he spoke on the BBC means that Jürg R. Schwyter's new book on the history of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English, a work otherwise likely to be overlooked as of interest to a narrower range of scholars in linguistics only, should be of keen interest to Orwell scholars, as well as those working on literature in Britain in the interwar years more generally.

REVIEW

The committee existed between 1926 and 1939, and its influence continued on into Orwell's period at the BBC and beyond, although as a body it ceased to exist for most practical purposes in 1937. Its members included not only Shaw himself but Robert Bridges, the then-Poet Laureate, David Cecil, Rose Macaulay and I. A. Richards (Virginia Woolf turned the invitation down) (pp 96-97). Had the committee continued on into the 1940s, one may imagine that Orwell would have been an obvious person to approach as a prospective member. Schwyter's book is primarily concerned with offering a history of the committee and its bureaucratic struggles both internal and external. In this, thanks to extensive archival research, he succeeds admirably, and the book should be read by anyone with an interest in the history of the BBC (and inter-war institutions more generally, perhaps, due to its insights into the machinations and muddling involved alongside efficiency and innovation). Equally, it sheds light on an under-investigated attempt at language standardisation, with the introduction giving a useful overview of the issues involved for the non-expert. As for the scholar of literature, this book gives a fascinating glimpse of the arguments over the 'correct' pronunciations of individual words that a presenter such as Orwell would have been expected to follow.

It is here, however, that the book, so rich on institutional history, becomes (curiously enough, as Schwyter is a linguist) rather frustrating. Although Appendix IV reproduces the notes on words discussed for the third edition of *Broadcast English I*, the BBC's published guide, as well as those discussed later (including, therefore, comments from 1926 to 1937), Schwyter does go into details of problematic words such as 'ski' (/ʃi:/ or /ski:/?) and 'margarine' (with /dʒ/ rather than /g/, despite Unilever's entreaties: pp 49-53). But very little detail or analysis is offered of individual words. It

would be precisely this that would be of most use to the reader interested in literature and cultural history. We know that ‘fascism’ was discussed in 1933, with ‘fásh-izm’ (=/'fæʃɪzɪzəm/, presumably) as the pronunciation given as correct; what is not discussed is what other possibilities there were (p. 243). It would be fascinating to know whether Orwell was first introduced to the word in this form, the usual one today and clearly Italian-based and contemporary but with a ‘domesticated’ /æ/ rather than the more safely foreign /ɑː/, perhaps, or a more distancing classical pronunciation with /sk/ rather than /ʃ/, as opposed to a truly naturalised /s/. This would potentially open up fascinating avenues of research. However, we are not given details of what other pronunciations were heard at the time; all that we are left with are conjectures of the type that I have just offered.

Equally, given Orwell’s famous dictum about the need to avoid foreign phrases (and one, therefore, presumes foreign words, too), the treatment of ‘questionnaire’ raises interesting issues that also go unanswered. This is now /,kwestʃə'neə/, a fully naturalised form that has evidently lost its Frenchness and foreignness. In his reading of his ‘Under Which Lyre’ (1946), however, W. H. Auden clearly pronounces it as /,kɛstiːɒ'neə/, a form just as evidently still ‘foreign’ – the pronunciation of <qu> as /k/ rather than /kw/ being the most obvious indicator possible that for the poet at least the word had yet to become one that Orwell would have allowed into his ideal prose. What, though, is the evidence from Schwyter’s book and the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English? The recommended pronunciation, discussed in July 1930 and September 1934, is given as ‘kwestiōnnáire’ (=/,kwestiːɒ'neə/, presumably), which is to say a form half-way between Auden’s and the usual modern one (pp 251-252). In other words, the term would appear to have been more naturalised in general use than Auden’s later pronunciation would suggest. This conclusion, however, is complicated by the note appended in 1930 – ‘Recommended the use of the *English* word “questionary”’ (my italics) – which suggests that notwithstanding the suggested Anglicised pronunciation, it was still seen as a foreign import. But then the recommended omission of the 1930 note in 1934 suggests increasing acceptance, *pace* Auden. The conclusion can only be, perhaps unsurprisingly, that ‘questionnaire’ was in flux through the 1930s: the degree to which such a case study makes our reading of Orwell’s fifth rule less simple to judge and apply historically should be clear.

Of course, such questions, fascinating as they be, and as much as they may suggest new approaches for collaboration between those working on language and those working on literature, are not those that Schwyter sets himself to answer. Neither is it his task to explore the ramifications in studies of Orwell’s thinking on language and the creation of Newspeak that his unearthing of the

Sub-Committee on Words of 1935-1937 (pp 129-147) may have. This body was created to invent new words for new concepts – had it had its way, we might be talking about ‘view-boxes’ rather than ‘television sets’ and ‘stop-and-goes’ rather than ‘traffic lights’ (p. 139). If Orwell knew about the sub-committee and its work, then this case of a semi-political bureaucratic body attempting to control vocabulary creation would become a very obvious contender for the source of Newspeak. In this sense, Schwyter’s book, aimed as it is at linguists, performs for literary scholars perhaps the most valuable service that a monograph can: it raises questions and suggests new lines of research, besides being an excellent sourcebook for material that would otherwise be buried in archives.

The volume is marred, however, by extremely careless editing. It is worrying that a linguistics text published by OUP should show such an array of errors in printing the International Phonetic Alphabet. For example, the length mark is usually given as a colon, and <ɘ> is mistakenly used on occasion for the shwa (e.g. p. xi). This carelessness sometimes creates wider problems. For instance, when discussing *Broadcast English II*, the 1930 BBC booklet on place-name pronunciation, Schwyter gives as a typical entry that for Wrangaton in Devon. The 1930 BBC IPA is given as <'ræŋətən>, which is quite impossible: presumably <ŋ> is an error for <ŋ> (p. 124). In a book more carefully edited, either this error would not be there, or, if it was, we could be sure that it was an error from the BBC in 1930. As *Dictating to the Mob* stands, however, we can seldom be sure when and where error has crept in. This, coupled with very poor image reproduction (and the unattractive, jarring and distracting use of a sans-serif typeface for all long quotations), is much to the volume’s detriment.

REVIEW

These considerations apart, *Dictating to the Mob*, notwithstanding its ostensibly niche (whether /ni:f/ or /nɪf/ appears not to have been discussed) subject matter, is a work that can be read with great interest by those working on Orwell, and on interwar British culture more generally, who would normally never consider language standardisation and the niceties of changes in pronunciation as fruitful ground. Above all, the questions it raises suggest several potentially fascinating new avenues of inquiry.

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